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ESTHER GITMAN

Alojzije Stepinac
Pillar of human rights

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Hrvatsko katoličko sveučilište

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Hrvatsko katoličko sveučilište
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I'm grateful to my husband, Dr. Israel Gitman, who deserves all my appreciation and gratitude. Throughout our lives together he has encouraged me to undertake tasks that I dreamed about but thought were beyond my reach, you were and you still are my anchor.

I dedicate this work to my beloved daughter Michal Gitman and to her husband Dan Drillich who had blessed us with six grandchildren Gabrielle, Gilad, Elisheva, Odelia, Yarden and Orlee with the hope and prayers for a kinder and gentler world.

Abbreviations

AIFM	Archives of the Italian Foreign Ministry
AFŽ	Antifašistički front žena (Antifascist Women's Front)
AJC	American Jewish Committee
BiH	Bosna i Hercegovina (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
DELASEM	Delegazione per l'Assistenza degli Emigranti Ebrei (Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants)
GESTAPO	Geheime Staatspolizei – Tajna državna policija (Gestapo, Gestapo Police)
GUZ	Glavni urudžbeni zapisnik (Main Registration File)
HDA	Hrvatski državni arhiv, Zagreb (Croatian State Archives, Zagreb)
HICEM	Hebrew Imigrant Colonization Emigration
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant and Sheltering
HZ	Historijski zbornik, Zagreb (Historical Anthology)
IHP	Institut za hrvatsku povijest, Zagreb (Institute of Croatian History)

IRC	International Red Cross
JA	Jugoslavenska armija (Yugoslav Army)
Jal	Jevrejski almanah, Beograd (Jewish Almanach, Belgrade)

JDC/ JOINT	American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee
JIM	Jevrejski istorijski muzej, Beograd, (Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade)
MUP	Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova
NAZ	Nadbiskupijski arhiv Zagreb (Archives of the Archbishopric of Zagreb)
NDH	Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (Independent State of Croatia)
NOB	Narodno-oslobodilačka borba
ORT	Organization for Rehabilitation and Training
OZNA	Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda (Division for people's protection)
RSHA	Reichssicherheitshauptamt
RUR	Ravnateljstvo ustaškog redarstva (Directorate of Ustaša Police)
SD	Sicherheitsdienst – Obavještajna služba SS-a i Nacionalsocijalističke partije
SS	Schutz-Staffel – Zaštitne snage
UNRRA	United Nation Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
UNS	Ustaška nadzorna služba (Ustaša Surveillance Service)
WRB	War Refugee Board, Washington
ZAVNOH	Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske (Territorial Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia)
ZKRZ	Zemaljska komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača (Territorial Commission for Ascertainment of War Crimes committed by occupying Forces and their Collaborators)
ŽOZ	Židovska općina Zagreb (Jewish Community of Zagreb)

GUIDE TO CROATIAN AND BOSNIAN PRONUNCIATIONS

The Croatian and Bosnian consonants for which the pronunciation differs from English usage are shown below.

C	Ts, as in “tsar”
Ć	Ch, (soft) as the “t” in “future”
Č	Ch, (hard) as the “tch” in “teacher”
Đ	J, (soft) as the “g“ in “organization”
J	y, as in “Yugoslavia”
Lj	li, as in “medallion”
Š	sh, as in “shoulder”
Ž	zh as in “Zhivago”

Preface

Just a few sentences that describe some of my experiences, which motivated me to undertake an ambitious task as going back to school in my 50's, with the objective to earn a Ph.D. in an area that little or no research has been done: *Rescue of Jews during WWII in the Ustaša controlled Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.* Those who heard the topic of my research commented: "It sounds as an oxymoron." I also recall, that prior to sending my submission application for a *Fulbright Fellowship*, the interviewer asked: "What is your research topic and why would it deserves such a prestigious fellowship?" My reply was: "I would like to explore the rescue of Jews in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during WWII, 1941–1945." I saw a look of surprise on the interviewer's face, finally she asked: "Why on earth would you want to research such a topic, when the entire world knows what Ustaša Croats did to the Jews and others?" I replied: "Yes, many Jews were murdered in the Ustaša concentration camps, but, my mother and I survived and so did all the other Jews I knew in my childhood, our survival should be attributed to the assistance we received from Croatian friends, neighbors, clergy and to various humanitarian organizations."

She hardly let me finish, exclaiming: "Amazing story, I never heard it before! Please, write a strong proposal, ask your professors to review it and then bring it to me for a final evaluation."

After four months I received a reply:

> The J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board and The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United State Department of State grants you a year fellowship to Zagreb, Croatia, for the academic year 2002–2003.

The episode described above began months earlier, when my daughter, by now a mother of six, insisted that I tell her what had happened to our family during WWII and how did my mother and I survive while thousands perished? But, I, like most young children who survived the Holocaust, remembered little and what memories I do have were probably browed from stories I heard in my childhood. What is certain, however, I had neither the inclination nor the desire to listen to survivors' stories. Similarly, survivors, like my grandparents and my mother, who had experienced the atrocities, lacked the emotional strength to share their sorrow and bewilderment with others, not even with their own children.

The acts of humiliation were so acute, the victims were dispossessed of home, family, food, water and self-dignity, to such an extent that they were unable to voice it. The historian Yehuda Bauer states:

> I do mean to describe acts of humiliation and oppression so extreme that the victims were deprived of all privacy and personal feelings of shame, of any kind of individuation in their surroundings of their names, personalities, and family connections, of control over their bodily functions, and that many were reduced to walking automatons on the verge of death (called *Musselmanner* in camp language).[1]

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[1] Yehuda BAUER, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002), p. 19.

Although the impact of the atrocities conceived by Nazi Germany and eventually implemented almost in every European country, excluding Finland and Denmark, was defined as: "*The Final Solution of the Jewish Question*." Hitler was the supreme architect of the Jewish catastrophe. It is he who transformed the liquid ideas of 1940 in to the hard reality of 1941 genocide.[2] The venerable German historian of Jewish origins, Raul Hilberg attests: "Nowhere was the determination to implement the final solution so deeply rooted as in Germany; nowhere was the issue so fundamental."[3]... The Final Solution was intended, by Hitler and his cohorts, to ensure the end to Jewish presence in the world.

The enormity of the killing and murder led the United Nations, in the early 1950's to allocate funds and create crews that would, in every European country, begin interviewing and recording survivors' stories. The objective of the program was to identify and punish the culprits and to a lesser degree to uncover rescuers. The U. N's, broad questionnaire was geared also towards identifying where, when, how and by whom the atrocities were executed?

While uncovering the perpetrators and their atrocities were of utmost importance the national and international authorities had little interest in the rescuers even though throughout the war years, the rescuers individually and in groups formed a virtual chain of rescuers, who by now are most likely faceless, nameless and forgotten, who at one times endangered their lives to save other humans and most often Jews.

As stated above, rescue of Jews by non-Jews was not a popular subject for research; first, it was in rare cases that survivors met and identified

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[2] Raul HILBERG, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945*, (Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 16.

their rescuers, some survivors had as many as twenty rescuers, each did his/her share at a certain place and time. Thus, the objective of my current research was and still is, to identify why some of these individuals and entities were ready to put themselves and their families in harm's way? Did religion or political affiliation play a role in their conduct, or was it their innate humanity?

I recall my interview with Ljerka Auferber, a survivor, originally from Osijek but who in 2003 resided in Zagreb. Ljerka described how towards the mid 1942 she was running, trying to escape from a group of Ustaša who were chasing her. Just as they were about to grab her, a car stopped picked her up and continued to drive for six hours without a stop. Ljerka recognized the man, he was a manager in her father's business before it was confiscated by the Ustaša authorities. Finally, they reached Ilidža, a small village near Sarajevo. In this place the manager had many relatives who he knew would care for Ljerka. For a while she was safe with them but neighbors began noticing a stranger. After some deliberations, they placed Ljerka in a secluded home of a young couple of her own age. For an entire year, this couple fed and catered for all her needs, yet, after the war, Ljerka was so absorbed in settling her own life that she never thanked the couple for saving her, nor did she register their names as "Righteous Gentiles" with Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem. Now that they are dead, she regrets her silence and feels compelled to tell her story.

Incidents of "forgetfulness" were both a way of coping with reality and of pretending that nothing had happened. Ljerka, among many other survivors, believed that they had a need and the right to catch up on life without having to relive the past. Also, survivors felt guilty for surviving while so many of their family members and friends perished. Only those who lived through hell and survived felt a need and an urgency to expose

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[3] Ibid, p. 78.

the atrocities that took place during World War II and were in a sound frame of mind to tell the entire world what had happened to those who did not have three Aryan grandparents.

Historians in Tito's Yugoslavia were busy writing books, articles, and monographs predominantly on the machinery of murder but the rescuers, those who risked their own lives by giving the opportunity to others to live were frightened to tell their stories and reveal the names of those they saved. Similarly, survivors failed to reveal the names of their rescuers, mostly, out of fear of Tito's regime. I remember that after the war my family had an expression, *the walls have ears,* not understanding the implication of the statement, I would search for the ears they were mentioning frequently, but I never saw them, believing that only grown-up can see such things.

I also recall that when I came to Zagreb in 2002 and began calling survivors to set an appointment for an interview, they refused to talk to me. It was only after I engaged a local woman to make an introductory call on my behalf; some agreed to see me; but even then it was noticeable that they were uncomfortable telling me their stories. Fortunately, from them I learned about the rescue activities of Archbishop Stepinac who believed that all humans regardless of ethnicity and religion are God's Children. They also related how on December 6, 1943, the SS authorities in Zagreb entered the Lavoslav Schwarz home for elderly Jews, ordering the residents to vacate the premises, within ten days, stating that those remaining in the building would be deported to Auschwitz. At the request of the Zagreb's Jewish Community, Stepinac organized the transfer of fifty-eight elderly Jews to the archbishopric's building in Brezovica, near Zagreb.

Later on I learned that Stepinac also rescued approximately 1000 Jewish partners in mixed marriages and scores of individuals who were un-

der his protective umbrella. About his greatest contribution to the rescue of Jews, including my mother and me, I learn from Menachem Shelah, a Jewish historian from Croatian origins, who uncovered that Stepinac and Abbot Marcone, with Vatican's assistance, ensured the stay of all Jews in the safety of the Italian zones of occupation, on the Adriatic. In Korčula and Vela Luka about 1000 Jews found protection and on the Island of Rab under the safety of the Italian army approximately 3600 survived. In sum, it is clear that rescue was attempted but most such attempts failed-not because those who tried were incompetent but because they lived in dire and desperate times.

Despite the relatively small number of survivors in Europe, there were in Israel individuals who understood the need to create a program that would recognize and reward the rescuers who had helped Jews under extreme danger, one of them was Mordecai Paldiel, the former director of the "Righteous among the Nations" program at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, stating:

> We have an obligation, indeed, to ourselves and to posterity to remember this terrible event as a lesson and a warning, lest it happen again. …we dare not allow this to lead us to hopelessness and despair; to unwittingly profess a negative philosophy of life – that is, that the world is governed by the law of the jungle…To help us maintain this image of man, the Holocaust has provided us with examples of human behavior at its most elevated best; of men and women, within German-occupied Europe and from all walks of life, who were prepared to risk their lives to save Jews from the Nazis.[4]

While Yad Vashem recognized that the search for the *Holocaust Righteous* was crucial and needed to continue, the realization soon emerged

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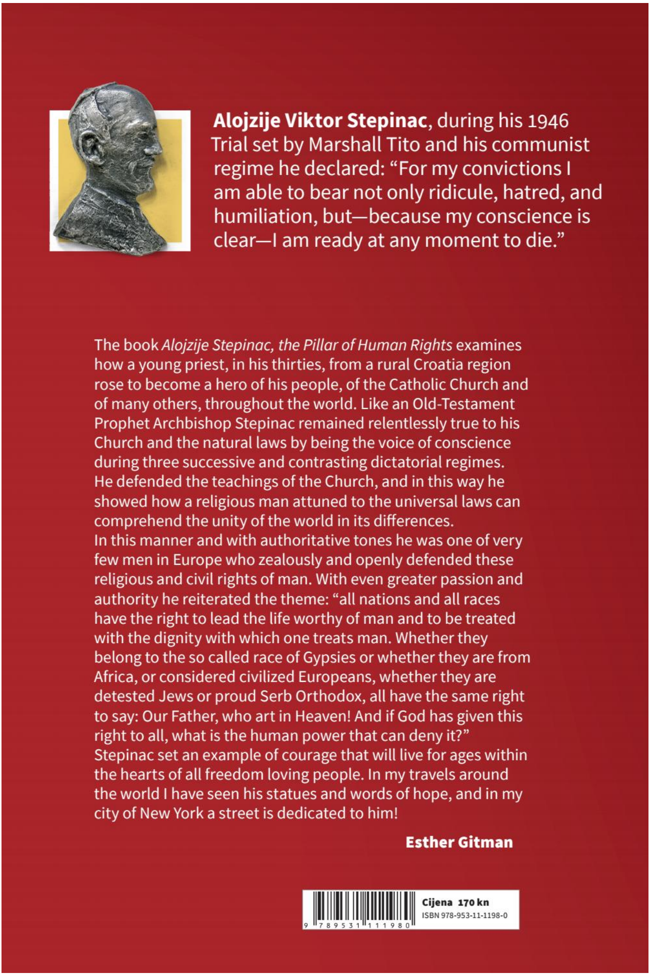
[4] Mordecai Paldiel, address at "Congregation B'nai Israel of Boca Raton," Boca Raton, Florida, November 27, 1998.

that the topic of "rescue" had to be broadened to include not only the actions of a few unique individuals.

My work, hopefully, will highlight the deeds of those individual rescuers whose names I encountered and other that I met, among the several hundred I identified I'll mention a few: The Croatian Archbishop Alojzije Viktor Stepinac, Dr. Ivo Petrić, former health minister who escaped during the war out of fear for his life, Jaška Kalogera, Frano Kritić, Dr. Vera Oberiter, Olga Neumann, Drs. Ante Vuletić and Stanko Sielski many others are found in my current book and in my previous book *When Courage Prevailed*. The institution that assisted throughout the war years were: The Italian second Army, local and international humanitarian organizations including the Red Cross, the JDC, JOINT, DELASEM, (Assistances to the Jews), the Partisans and ZAVNOH, (Territorial Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia).

My own interest in the subject of rescue initially was of personal nature, yes, I wished to find out who saved my mother, me and some other Jews I knew in my childhood. But once I immersed myself into the subjects of the Holocaust, it became apparent that under the pressure of Nazi Germany and the Ustaša exerted on ordinary Croats to take part in the annihilation of Jews, rescue became difficult and practically impossible. Yet many did it, and those I aimed to find!

With this burning desire to search and find rescuers, I came to Zagreb in 2002 and since then my time and energies are fully dedicated to the subject of rescue. The most exciting and revealing findings were those that demonstrated that even in the darkest days in human history we can still identify thousands of individual sparking lights that gave and still give hope to all of us!



Alojzije Viktor Stepinac, during his 1946 Trial set by Marshall Tito and his communist regime he declared: "For my convictions I am able to bear not only ridicule, hatred, and humiliation, but—because my conscience is clear—I am ready at any moment to die."

The book *Alojzije Stepinac, the Pillar of Human Rights* examines how a young priest, in his thirties, from a rural Croatia region rose to become a hero of his people, of the Catholic Church and of many others, throughout the world. Like an Old-Testament Prophet Archbishop Stepinac remained relentlessly true to his Church and the natural laws by being the voice of conscience during three successive and contrasting dictatorial regimes. He defended the teachings of the Church, and in this way he showed how a religious man attuned to the universal laws can comprehend the unity of the world in its differences.

In this manner and with authoritative tones he was one of very few men in Europe who zealously and openly defended these religious and civil rights of man. With even greater passion and authority he reiterated the theme: "all nations and all races have the right to lead the life worthy of man and to be treated with the dignity with which one treats man. Whether they belong to the so called race of Gypsies or whether they are from Africa, or considered civilized Europeans, whether they are detested Jews or proud Serb Orthodox, all have the same right to say: Our Father, who art in Heaven! And if God has given this right to all, what is the human power that can deny it?"

Stepinac set an example of courage that will live for ages within the hearts of all freedom loving people. In my travels around the world I have seen his statues and words of hope, and in my city of New York a street is dedicated to him!

Esther Gitman

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